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Few homebuyers take a shine to solar energy option

By Berny Morson
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Christine O'Connor helped organize the first Earth Day at her college 30 years ago. She swaddled her two children in cloth diapers. She recycles everything.

So naturally O'Connor took the solar energy option when she bought a new home by McStain Enterprises Inc., a Boulder-based, environmentally conscious homebuilder.

"It's important people get started (using clean energy), to think of the environment when they start to build," O'Connor said.

A majority of Americans voice similar views in public opinion polls. But O'Connor is unique — she is the only one who has taken the solar energy option since McStain began offering it early last year.

Although many custom-built homes are solar-powered, McStain is the only builder to offer a solar option on regular production homes.

McStain officials and solar energy engineers say the cost of solar still discourages most consumers. The \$16,000 cost of the system

O'Connor chose for her Lowry redevelopment area home could add more than \$100 to a monthly mortgage payment with current interest rates topping 8 percent.

"The perception that it's a huge up-front cost to add — most people are pushing to get their payments down," said Kristen Shewfelt, McStain's environmental director.

"Do I want a solar energy system — put the money out for that — or do I want to put the money out for a Jetta tub in the master bedroom? There are still a lot of people who want the Jetta tub in the master bedroom," Shewfelt said.

The system O'Connor chose will cover about 30 percent of her electric bill. That savings includes credits she will receive because the solar panels on top of her garage will feed power back to Public Service Co. on sunny days.

But the monthly electric bill for an average family only comes to about \$34.50.

Solar panels produce energy at a cost of about 25 cents a kilowatt hour, the unit by which electric bills are calculated, said Byron Stafford, an engineer at the National Center for Renewable Energy in Golden. Public Service sells electricity — generated mostly by burning coal — for 5.75 cents per kilowatt hour.

"There are some people who are willing to put their money where their heart is, and those are the people who aren't going to look at just the dollars and cents, but say, 'It's worth it to me socially,'" Stafford said.

Public Service Company spokesman Mark Salley said Coloradans are willing to pay extra for "green" energy that costs less than solar.

For example, some 15,000 customers have signed up for the company's wind energy program. They pay \$2.50 a month for each 100-kilowatt hour block of wind energy from a wind farm on the Colorado-Wyoming border.

Kirk Stokes, president of Altair Energy, the company that installs solar generators for McStain, said the system makes power that can be stored for use during a power outage.

"People like the idea of generating their own power, at least in part cutting one of those little ties that you have," Stokes said. "People like to be

independent."

O'Connor cites that advantage as part of her decision to buy a solar home. She recalls her children doing homework by firelight during a Public Service outage.

"In Colorado, it's crazy not to have it if you can get it in during construction," she said.

O'Connor and her husband are both lawyers, although she is not working outside the home. They and their two children will move to Lowry from Park Hill in June.

Unlike the clunky solar panels of two decades ago, the new ones sit unobtrusively on the roof of her garage, which is pitched at an angle to catch the rays of the sun from the south.

The \$16,000 cost isn't bad, O'Connor said.

"It may sound like a lot," she said. "But granite countertops in the kitchen are \$8,000. We're not doing that."

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